Curatorial Concerns with Architectural Collections

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The museum collections at most parks in the North Atlantic Region include architectural elements. Many more historic architectural materials are found outside of the museum collections, however. Generally, these other "collections" are accumulations of fabric removed from historic structures within the park. In some cases, materials have been collected from historic structures no longer extant, both inside and outside the park boundaries, for the purpose of preserving significant or typical elements of the structures or as symbols of the structures. Quite often material is collected with the thought that it can be reused.

While we acknowledge these realities for collections, the focus of this article is those artifacts that have been collected and documented that should be permanently retained and added to the museum collection. (The whole subject of collecting architectural elements for reuse, the criteria for selecting such elements, the ethical considerations and standards for collecting or maintaining are points for discussion and debate in future articles.)

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Unfortunately, given the large sizes of pieces and often large volume of materials, these accumulations, including salvage, historically significant materials, and typical materials are stored in basements, attics or barns. These "make-do" storage areas have poor conditions which are not suitable to the long-term preservation of these artifacts. Too often materials have not been documented for their context and significance.

Architectural fragments are primary cultural resource artifacts with many perceived values, just as is the case for other types of objects in museum collections. The documentation prepared by historical architects, craftsmen and others during preservation work on a structure is comparable to the records created during an archeological excavation or the descriptive notes on an archival collection written while processing the records. The principle is the same: the individual items do not stand alone; their value and history are enhanced when they can be understood and documented in context within their original environment.

The following issues are critical to consider:

- criteria for collecting
- documentation
- storage and long-term preservation
- permanent collection vs. salvage and reuse

The most difficult, it seems, is the first: what criteria should be used for selecting historic architectural materials for permanent retention in a museum collection? Typical criteria might include the following:

- Is it a character-defining feature, e.g., a fireplace mantel, door, decorative element, window, etc.?
- Is it unique?
- Is it typical, e.g., a representative sample of architectural material or features?
- Is it documented?
- If it is not documented, is there sufficient information extant to document the material?
- What is its condition? Can it reasonably be preserved or is its condition so deteriorated that it cannot?
- Is documentation of the object sufficient if retention is not recommended or feasible, especially if it is in poor condition or common?

To address these needs and foster more awareness of the value of architectural fragments, it may be helpful to start at the beginning of the curatorial process. The scope of collection statement, or collecting policy, for a museum serves to guide the selection of materials to be acquired for permanent care. The statement defines objectives for the types of materials, reasons for collecting, and circumstances in which artifacts will be acquired. Inclusion in the institution's scope of collection statement formally recognizes architectural fragments as a valuable component of the museum collection. This becomes a foundation for the institution's commitment to collect, care for, and share information about these unique artifacts.

In preparing a new scope of collection statement or rewriting an existing one, the curatorial staff need to include information about the significance of historic structures within the institution or park. For planned preservation projects, the statement should also address the need for documentation of fragments to be an integral component of the preservation work. Examples of items to be selected for the museum collection may be given in the statement such as, "some materials, too weakened to be reused themselves, should be saved as models for replacement pieces." The assessment process should involve the historical architect, curator, craftsman, and other staff, as appropriate, to gather different "perceptions of value" and determine priority items to include in the collection.

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Depending on the situation, another approach for some items may be to document, but not retain the original material. The collecting policy must clearly distinguish between those materials that will be retained in the museum collection and those that are being retained for reuse. All materials should fit into one of these two categories. Grey areas or indeterminate accumulations of material

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should be strongly discouraged.

The collecting criteria stated in the scope of collection statement should be conveyed to contractors and others who conduct work on historic structures to ensure the smooth transition of architectural fragments which will be considered for inclusion in the museum collections. Documentation must accompany historic building materials when they are conveyed to the curator. The documentation is the basis for cataloging, caring for, providing research access and sharing information about these unique materials. Just as with archeological, archival and historic furnishings collections, the documentation accompanying these materials is an inseparable part of their value. Their significance may be diminished to the extent that there may be little point in saving such materials. Materials set aside as salvage for re-use should be documented and labeled as well, to facilitate current and future preservation work.

A primary curatorial value for architectural collections is that, like other primary cultural resources, they can be re-evaluated from many viewpoints by many researchers.

The National Park Service has benefited in recent years from focused re-evaluations of archeological collections and archives by curators and those in these related professions. These reassessments have produced some new guidelines which direct staff to the interdisciplinary network of professional relationships necessary to facilitate their work. Just as NPS archeological projects are now required to cover the initial costs to "catalog, stabilize and store a collection" (Special Directive #87-3 Conservation of Archeological Resources), architectural projects should do the same. Field notes, photographs, measured drawings,

How To Read More About It

While this issue of CRM *is focused on architectural artifacts and architectural study collections, curatorial information targeted to this specific resource type has yet to be developed. However, the National Park Service has a significant body of technical information about the overall care of collections as well as specific conservation techniques that have application to architectural collections. Information about two publications series is provided here.*

National Park Service Museum Handbook

The *NPS Museum Handbook, Part I,* "Museum Collections" (Revised 9/90) provides guidance on scope of collections; environmental monitoring and control; pest management; museum collections storage; handling, packing and shipping objects; conservation treatment; security and fire protection; emergency planning; curatorial health and safety; planning and programming for museum collections management; and museum ethics. This part of the handbook also addresses preventive conservation for various classes of objects, including archeological collections, paintings, cellulose nitrate negatives, paper objects, textiles and wooden objects, metal objects, and objects made from ceramic, glass, and stone. Part I of the handbook is available for purchase through the Superintendent of Public Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325. The following information is pertinent to order this publication: GPO Stock Number: 024-005-01078-5; Price: $36.00 (Price includes regular postage and handling. International customers need to add an additional 25% to the price.)

The *NPS Museum Handbook, Part II,* "Museum Records" provides guidance on documentation and accountability for cultural collections (e.g., archeology, ethnography, history, and archives) and natural history collections (e.g., biology, geology, and paleontology). The topics addressed include: accessioning, cataloging, inventorying, marking, record photography, incoming and outgoing loans, and deaccessioning procedures. Part II is currently being updated. The revised edition will be available through the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1994.

The *NPS Museum Handbook, Part III* is currently being written. This part will provide guidance on the use of museum collections in exhibits, interpretive and educational activities, and research; unrelated activities in spaces housing collections; motion pictures and photography; reproduction of original materials; office art; publications; and use of collections by Native American and other ethnic groups. Part III is expected to be available through the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1996.

To place your name and address on a mailing list to receive announcements on the availability of Parts II and III, and future updates, write to the Curatorial Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

National Park Service Conserve O Gram Series

The *NPS Conserve O Gram* series consists of brief, technical leaflets distributed periodically to provide park and museum staff with a wide variety of timely collection care information and techniques.

Conserve O Gram leaflets provide specific procedures, techniques and materials for storage and exhibit of objects and ongoing preventive conservation, including housekeeping; information concerning the characteristics and deterioration of object/specimen materials; health and safety updates and procedures; new practices in the museum field that apply to museum collections; and sources of assistance, including bibliographies.

Conserve O Gram leaflets are intended for both experienced and inexperienced staff responsible for the care and use of museum collections. They appear in loose-leaf format, with new topics added as needed and out-of-date issues revised or deleted. Comments on the program may be sent to the address below.

The *Conserve O Gram* series is currently under revision for re-issue in fall 1993. The revised series will be available to interested organizations and individuals by subscription through the Superintendent of Public Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325. To place your name and address on a mailing list to receive announcements on the availability of the revised series, write to: National Park Service, *Conserve O Gram* Series, Curatorial Services Division, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia 25425, U.S.A.

and all related documentation must be accessioned with the artifacts into the museum collection. This promotes a smoother transition and a relatively short time frame from the excavation to the cataloging work, lessening loss of critical information which occurs when years elapse

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between these two activities. The investment in time and advance planning may challenge a cultural resource manager faced with additional, pressing responsibilities and extremely limited funds, but the park benefits from the long-term preservation of the broad spectrum of cultural resources.

Storage and long-term preservation are always difficult issues for museum collections: they are considerably more difficult for architectural collections because of their bulk and size. Museum quality storage is expensive and, in most institutions and parks, in short supply, making the rationale and criteria for collecting all the more important. Any storage facility should be envisioned as providing active care, not just warehouse space. A storage facility must have curatorial staff to provide preservation and security of artifacts and their documentation, cataloging, monitoring of storage conditions, and access for researchers.

When a team, representing a variety of professions, is involved during the early planning stages of a preservation project, the quality of the overall project is improved. Each team member (and profession) can remind the others of the factors to be considered in conceptualizing the entire project and can lay the groundwork so that each of the various cultural resources can receive a fair evaluation. To try to reconstruct the provenance of an undocumented architectural fragment could be tremendously time consuming (e.g., requiring oral history interviews), but may be warranted in some cases. Setting up standards to be followed for documentation and treatment of fragments prior to the preservation project supports a thorough preservation project.

A primary curatorial value for architectural collections is that, like other primary cultural resources, they can be re-evaluated from many viewpoints by many researchers. New bits of information are revealed and may support future preservation efforts. Architectural elements can also enhance the evidential value of other museum collections. Cultural landscapes, archives, archeological collections, historic furnishings, and historic structures each enhance the significance of the others, forming a complex tapestry of interwoven cultural and natural resources.

For example, an 1844 signed, penciled inscription found on the underside of a wooden board during preservation work on the Longfellow Barn was quickly matched by the preservation carpenters and curatorial staff to original bills in the manuscript collections of the Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge, MA. In another instance, prior to preservation work in the mid-1970s, a large bullseye window was found in the barn with no labels as to its history. In processing the historic photograph collection, images were discovered of the window in place documenting its original location. Other manuscripts helped to place the date of structural changes in that area of the Longfellow House at c. 1910, which in turn helped to date historic plant materials also shown in the pre-1910 photograph. Architectural elements selected for museum collections will be there to supply answers for questions yet unasked.

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tion to great castles, forts, abbeys, and prehistoric sites, English Heritage manages several houses that have only relatively recently lost their internal surface finishes, either through fire or deliberate stripping out to serve the trade. Particularly striking, for example, are Sutton Scarsdale Hall (the dramatic shell of an early 18th-century baroque man-

Fig. 2. Witley Court is a spectacular ruins of an Italianate Victorian mansion near Worcester. Photo courtesy English Heritage.

sion in Derbyshire), Appuldurcombe House (figure 1) and Witley Court (figure 2). Such properties are managed by English Heritage on behalf of the British government because they are of great importance but beyond the means of private individuals, societies or local authorities. Seen as part of a nationwide portfolio, including a network of modern warehouse stores, they effectively constitute England's greatest architectural study collection.

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